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1260 f. 9

The Sophistry of Words

1837



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from the orig.
THE

SOPHISTRY OF WORDS,

OR

THE CAUSE AND EFFECTS

OF

INADEQUATE APPELLATIONS OF SIN CONSIDERED,

WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE PRESENT CRISIS.

"Nomina honesta prætenduntur vitiiis."—Tacitus.

"Specious names are lent to cover vices."—Addison.

(Reprinted from the Oxford Herald.)

BY A MEMBER OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD,

Author of an Explanation of all the Holydays, &c. &c. &c.

Διὰ τῆς χρηστολογίας καὶ εὐλογίας ἑξαπατῶσι. ROM. xvi. 18.

OXFORD,—MDCCCXXXVII.

1260 f. 9



TO THE
COLLEGES OF LINCOLN AND MAGDALEN
THE FOLLOWING PAGES
AS A
SMALL MARK OF GRATITUDE AND AFFECTION
ARE MOST RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED.

P R E F A C E .

THE following Essay appeared in the pages of the "Oxford Herald" in the months of March and April, 1836. It is reprinted from thence in a separate form, both in the hope that it may be generally useful in the present important crisis, and also in compliance with the wishes of several friends of the Writer. No other alteration has been made in it, than the addition of a sentence or two, suited to the present artful sophistry by which the enemies of the Church are at present attempting its overthrow, by a specious pretext for the abolition of Church-rates. That it may be made useful in exciting attention to the momentous subject on which it treats, is the Author's sincere and most earnest wish.

OXFORD,
MARCH 14, 1837.

THE
SOPHISTRY OF WORDS,

OR

INADEQUATE APPELLATIONS OF SIN CONSIDERED.

NEVER, perhaps, was any declaration more erroneous in its foundation, more controvertible in its sentiments, or more tending to danger in its consequences, than that of the profound statesman and justly admired writer, who affirmed, that "Vice loses half its evils by losing all its grossness." Now if the chief evil of vice be considered its innate corruption and depravity, of which "grossness" is only the effervescence or ebullition, I do not see how it is possible to avoid coming to the conclusion that the proportion of evil has been much misstated. For if we content ourselves with simply lopping off the fruit and branches of a corrupt tree, while we leave the *source* of evil in the earth, little benefit will accrue. In like manner, if vice be deprived of its *open* abominations, but no check be laid on the heart, it may grow deceptive, but never improved—may learn to *conceal* its wickedness, but not to forsake it. Vice of a gross and open nature may be compared to a pestilence, which in the course of a few days or hours deprives its victim of life; while that of a more refined description may not inaptly be considered similar to the treacherous disease of consumption, which flatters the sufferer with vain hopes, and thus restrains him from using timely precautions, by the fallacious idea of their needlessness. The evil is the same, even death, in both cases, and more frequently in the latter case than in the former, not because the disorder is *in itself* of a more deadly nature, but because its deceitfulness precludes alarm. The grossness of vice will, indeed, often lead sooner to a fatal termination than that which is artfully concealed; but whenever that termination does take place, its result will be equally disastrous. It may, however, I think, be very fairly questioned whether vice, continuing *in nature* essentially the same, though changed in *outward appearance*, ever can properly be said to lose *all* its grossness. But let it be admitted, for the sake of argument, that this may be the case, still can it be said that to have checked the deformity of vice from openly appearing, is to have done any thing towards its complete extirpation? Would it be considered as synonymous with checking the progress of dishonesty, to teach the thief to steal with more art, and in a covert manner? Rather would it not be thought an addition to the evil?

I will not, however, further pursue this part of the controversy, but will simply remark, that my object for citing the opinion before alluded to, was to demonstrate how great a contrast is presented thereto, in the words of the Roman moralist and historian, selected for the thesis of this disquisition. To me it appears that the very external grossness of vice has been constituted as a salutary warning of the deeper pollution that lurks within—the friendly roar of the latent rock—the monitory darkness of the approaching storm.

It can hardly have escaped the notice of the admirers of one, whose writings have been considered by some the purest compositions in our own language, (need I name the amiable and virtuous Addison ?) that our present subject has been discussed by him in the most masterly style of his contemplative and exalted mind * ; and that, too, from the very words selected as the subject of our present inquiry. He has, however, confined his view too much to what are termed the *grosser* vices, and to their effect on *individuals* in their *private* capacity, to form a model for a general and moral essay. And while he has vigorously execrated the detested *effects* of false delicacy and softened names, he has entirely left reason or conjecture to supply the hidden *cause*.

Taking it, then, as at once and readily conceded, that every mind is convinced of the inexcusableness—the folly—and the danger of “lending specious names to cover vices,” I shall, in the pursuit of this most interesting and widely-extensive subject, endeavour to demonstate in regular order—

THE CAUSE OF THIS PERNICIOUS HABIT, AND ITS APPALLING EFFECTS—BOTH ON PRIVATE INDIVIDUALS AND ON PUBLIC BODIES.

“Nomina honesta prætenduntur vitiis!”

Whatever may be said to the contrary, (and the arguments alleged have neither been defective in number nor in speciousness,) there is no doctrine more plainly attested by Scripture—corroborated by reason—or demonstrated by experience, than the depravity of the human heart. Man is the subject of motives. Of this he is perfectly conscious, and equally so that those motives are the source of action—the well-spring of energy—the controllers of life. And hence arises his utter, though seldom boldly *expressed*, aversion from that humiliating doctrine which asserts that these very motives are diseased—that this well-spring itself is poisoned—that the controllers of life, the masters of human action, have themselves thrown off the heavenly allegiance, and rejected the divine control. Acting upon this abhorrence, man is compelled, in rejecting the idea that he is *under the dominion* of evil motives, to *forget*

* Spectator, vol. iv. 286.

(for determinate rejection is here out of the question) that he is under the dominion of motives *at all*.

Is proof of so startling an assertion demanded? I need refer only to the tissue of absurdities involved in the common expression, when speaking of a man stained by disgusting crimes; a slave to the vilest passions, and under the tyranny of the most sordid lusts, all is concluded by saying, "But after all he has a very good heart." What is this but in direct contradiction (I will not say to Scripture) but to reason, experience, common sense, to affirm that impure streams can emanate from a pure fountain—that corrupt fruit can be the native product of a good tree—that there is no connexion whatever between effect and cause? And hence must be traced the softened names, the tinselled appellations, the white-washed covering thrown over the native blackness and deformity of sin. There seems a natural wish in the human soul to neglect or deny the connexion *here* between effect and cause; or (I cannot otherwise express myself) to suppose an *intermediate* class of actions, neither good nor bad, and to make this class as numerous as possible. For instance, is it found impossible to trace the habitual drunkenness of one man, or the admitted licentiousness of another, to a good cause? And is it found equally impossible to avoid tracing it to some, even its native and spontaneous, principle? Then—lest, if the streams be admitted so gross, what must be thought of their fount?—immediately, by a softened appellation, both these crimes are placed in the already over-crowded ranks of *intermediate* actions—effects ungenerated by any cause or predilection either to good or bad—things performed by natural inclination, and that natural inclination utterly unconnected with any desire either to virtue or to vice!

Now is such an hypothesis credible? Is it borne out by reason? Will it stand the touch-stone of common sense? Surely, then, we ought to be predisposed to apprehend, that there must be some considerable strength in the idea that it takes such pains to repel, and yet at last can only repel so weakly. If common sense proclaims that there cannot be aims without a definite purpose, or proposed end—if religion and revelation go a step further, and announce to our reluctant understandings that this very neutrality of purpose, this very *negativeness* towards good, *would be positively evil*—we are compelled to see through the flimsy covering, that though men may call "evil" "good," or at least *not evil*, that to the eye of the candid reasoner, no less than to that of the enlightened Christian, it is "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," and the actions issue—and that nothing but the doctrine of man's *total* depravity can adequately and co-extensively account for the sinfulness of his conduct—nay, more, that that very gilding in which he arrays vice, is vice itself also. I mean not, when I

speak of man's *total* depravity, to draw from these premises that conclusion, which though probably in different ways, the Stoic in former days, and the ultra-Calvinist in modern times, has thence deduced. Man, though fallen, is yet man. Between the worst of human species and a fiend, there has always, to my mind at least, seemed this one prominent distinction;—That while none of the former seem to love sin for its own sake, (a thing which even the woven veil of words to hide its deformity demonstrates,) the fallen spirits really seem so to do. My meaning in the use of this word is *not* to affirm that every part of the human race is *equally* stained, and stained with sin's *deepest possible* dye; my intention is not to declare the *depth* (what mortal tongue can declare it?) to which the disease has penetrated, but that the malady has penetrated *every* faculty, and touched *every* part. I wish not to enter into the speculation *how black* the stain of human guilt may be, but to insist that that stain (though in unequal and differing degrees) is in every human soul a universal stain; or, to use the expressive words of Scripture, "The *whole* head is sick, and the *whole* heart faint;" but *how* sick, and *how* faint, God alone can tell. In a word, when I affirm human depravity to be total, I speak not of its *DEGREE*, but of its *EXTENT*; I state not that man is so "far gone from original righteousness" as to become a fiend; but that he is in *all* respects so far gone as to be a *sinful* man;—not that the divine image is *altogether effaced*, but in *EVERY FEATURE* *obscured*;—not that the light that is in him is total darkness, but that *every* ray of that light is dimmed.

I am aware that it may be said I have trenched on the borders of theological controversy beyond what was required for the investigation of a moral subject. But I do not know how in any other way it can *adequately* be accounted for, that man should thus speciously gild over vices, except from his aversion to the ever-echoing voice, which, alike in the pages of revelation,—the warnings of conscience—the occurrences of life, painfully and loudly proclaims "Thou hast fallen by thine iniquities!" Were but the heart acknowledged as desperately wicked, as in reality it is, the actions of that evil heart would not be so deceitfully, irrationally, and fatally under-rated; and the need, not of a partial amendment, but a *total* change—not of improvement, but of renovation, would be seen, acknowledged, acted on. But till then, as long as men, by neglect of motives, judge according to outward appearance, they never can, and never will, judge righteous judgment.

It is not required to look on man as some beautiful fabric *utterly* destroyed; but as a fabric over which corruption has in *every part* laid her withering finger; but while men will conceive that some columns yet stand unscathed, in all their pristine and august majesty, unimpaired by the destroyer's touch, they will hardly admit that other parts are more than *in danger*

of ruin—will erroneously view man as fallible rather than fallen—as more pitiable than depraved—more weak than wicked.

Having thus attempted to investigate the *cause* of the evil now before us, it remains but to point out its *baleful effects* on individuals in particular, and communities in general.

Forcibly has Addison expressed himself, "There is nothing immodest in letters and syllables. Fornication and adultery are modest words, because they express an evil action as criminal, and so as to excite horror and aversion, whereas words *representing the pleasure rather than the sin*,* are for this reason indecent and immoral. The eye that cannot bear the light is not delicate, but sore. I know not any thing more pernicious to good manners than the giving fair names to foul actions, for this confounds vice and virtue, and takes off that natural horror we have to evil" in its grosser forms.

And need these words corroboration? How many have had their youthful impressions of piety, which had stood many a sharp chilling storm of persecution, scorched by the relaxing sun of soft-toned appellations;—by the laughing, half-reproachful, half-pitying eye of the young and friendly scorner! How many a soul that would have recoiled with horror from the term of "drunkenness" has been wrapt into fatal security by that of "social conviviality!" How many a one, fresh in the as yet not entirely effaced glory of baptismal purity, has been entrapped into "youthful lusts, that war against the soul," by those who pretend to superior knowledge than the Omniscient;—to brighter and better joys than those provided by "the Father of mercies, and God of all comfort." A father's ineffable grief—a mother's flowing tears—the moth-fretted robe of beauty—the tarnished diadem of previous unsullied fame:—need I do more than appeal to these to prove the poet's declaration—

"Decipimur specie recti,
Nomina honesta prætenduntur vitiis?"

But, oh! what tongue, however eloquent, can speak—what imagination, however vivid, picture—what heart, however susceptible, conceive—the quenchless fire of misery, the ever-gnawing worm of remorse, which shall be their portion hereafter, who by false descriptions of sinful pleasure, have led the young and unwary to "the stumbling-stone and rock of offence," on which they have fallen to rise no more!

Above all, what woe unutterable shall be their fearful assignment, who by corrupted views of *common life scenes*, depicted with paltry wit, and imbued in every line with the grossest ideas, couched in the most innocent expressions, have spread the pestilence of sin into a yet untainted region—who have brought the youthful mind to that state when nothing is longer pure,

* What would our amiable moralist have said of that compound of talent, selfishness, and impurity, Lord Byron?

when even the very fairest scenes of nature, the loveliest works of art, the delight of social intercourse, *flow with an undercurrent of impurity*; and those very things intended for their welfare, become an occasion of falling; when (as it was so lately with touching beauty observed) whatever may become of the guilt, the moral stain is irreparable—the purity gone, and gone for ever.

LASTLY, it remains to point out the awful consequences of false and inadequate appellations of sin, as affecting COMMUNITIES. And ever be it remembered, that false and inadequate *conceptions* of sin are (as has been demonstrated) the cause of these false and inadequate appellations; or else a wilful resistance of the truth—a quenching of our convictions—a rejection of the light.—And wilful blindness is soon followed by judicial; he that will not see, ere long shall not see.

Public examples of our present point are neither few nor distant.

We need not hearken with the patriotic Waldenses, in all the agonies of suspense, for the echoed note of the vesper's bell;—we need not view the infuriated monarch of France, urging on by precept and example, cold-blooded, unpretended murder;—we need not descend the dungeons of the all-accursed, dread tribunal, and feed our eyes on the out-stretched rack, or the burning pile;—we need not bend our steps to Oxford's far-famed Bodleian structure, and read with scintillating lip, and burning eye, the death-warrant of the ever-blessed martyr king, surmounted by his own Initials of authority. Oh that we had to revert to these to prove how “*Nomina honesta prætenduntur vitiis.*”

The record of past ages—the time-worn scroll of other countries—the blood-endorsed chronicle of a neighbouring kingdom—have failed to shew some, that Christian blood, by Christians spilt, is unacceptable to God. In France, when infidelity burst forth in all its full dark-stained robe of horrors, rebellion started back from the form herself had made; when the blood of saints was “*OPENLY* shed like water” in those empurpled streets, nature fainted at the sight. And now the arch-enemy's course is varied—the seamless garb of Christ's church is less trod in the mire of unbelief; but *deep-lurking heresy*, under the specious name of discovery, is defiling; and schism, under that of private judgment and conscientious difference, rending it from top to bottom.

And we have had (nay, rather, are we not at this instant experiencing) one proof, one master-piece of the varied work of the father of lies in this our day? In a love not less marvellous for the church than the way in which that love is demonstrated, the infidel, the heretic, and the schismatic, have, under the specious pretext of (forsooth!) extending her usefulness, modestly and affectionately proposed the desecration of upwards of 600

dedicated temples; and to ensure effectually a greater vigilance for the future, have actually *succeeded* in suppressing ten of her divinely-constituted overseers. And to crown the whole, *fearing* lest its exemplary, its almost apostolical teachers, should neglect their scattered flock, these same *οἱ ἐκ ἀρχῆς φίλοι*, have added the gentle inducements of the sword and carabine, backed by *that deadness to temporalities*, which the kindly persuasives of famine and starvation must beyond doubt engender.

“And such the scenes, *while Christians sleep*,
Which fiends enjoy and angels weep.”

Nor have there been wanting men who, with unblushing front, and brow of brass, while calling themselves the church's best friends, have thus, under like specious pretexts, effectually done all in their power to destroy it: nor *one* who has prostituted the sacred powers of poesy to amuse posterity with scenes which might almost draw tears from a fiendish eye.

And what is the cause of all this? Let the Roman historian answer for me, “*Solitudinem faciunt, pacem appellant.*” But, oh! if ever the above-mentioned thesis was true; if ever names, almost sacred, were “lent” to deeds, for portraying which thought and words alike are wanting, it was on the occasion to which I now allude. The widow's grief, the orphan's tear, the aching thought of better days for e'er gone by, the father's woe at his loved one's hunger, the repression of once fondly cherished hopes of ennobling studies, *the fearful contrast between the pallid cheek and the too bright sparkling eye*—such scenes lowered, awfully lowered as we are, will yet require more to reconcile us to them, than the diabolical sneers of an Irish hard, or the boundless falsehoods of an Irish agitator. But to preserve this generous feeling; let us endeavour to view them, not through the ever-varying glass of politics, but by the never-failing touchstone of truth. Let us ever keep in mind that murder is *equally* at least murder, whether the sufferer be in a clerical or lay station—that heresy is heresy, though called discovery—that schism alters not, though dignified with the title of “private judgment”—that spoliation does not become one whit the less so, because it may be termed “necessary and effectual reform.”

For our own days, however, was it reserved to see a plan proposed for the rending in twain every right of property;—for the annihilation of a most important part of ecclesiastical revenue;—for the prostration of Christ's holy Church beneath the feet of those of whose mercy the ravening tiger, and of whose sincerity the subtle serpent are but faint types, under a mask of conciliation of grievance, propagation of peace, and security to that very Church itself. For our own days was it reserved to see the smooth-tongued tools of the diabolical political secretary give the honied words of persuasion to schemes which they would fain have hidden, in all their black enormity of guilt,

even from themselves. For our own days was the precious knowledge reserved, that to sap the Church's foundation is to increase its stability;—to leave a kingdom to every shade of heresy and schism the most effectual way to insure “pure and undefiled religion;”—and to open the floodgates of anarchy, to promote stability, harmony, and peace.

Let us, then, beware how by the deceit of verbal sophistry or *dread of the reproach of bigotry and narrow-mindedness*, we compromise our principles of right or wrong; for let us call to mind that those principles are *eternal* and *invariable*. And if we are too far gone *as a country* to get quit of the contamination of foreign education and foreign manners, still there remains something yet to be done for ourselves, for those persons we love, and for those *institutions* we value most.

There is a danger of being carried away from our principles, of being led away by this specious error of the wicked, of falling from our steadfastness. For our strength and consolation, let us often, therefore, revert in thought to that day when “the righteous man shall stand in great boldness before them that have afflicted him, and made no account of his labours; before those fools who counted his life madness, and his end to be without honour.” Then soft-toned names shall for ever lose their magic and deceitful influence; then “the churl shall be called bountiful, and the vile liberal, no more.” In contemplation of that day, well may we strike the prophetic and apostolic chord, and say, “Blessed is he that watcheth and keepeth his garments *white*.” Let him “not fear the reproach of men, neither be afraid of their revilings.”

Then they who by softened appellations have wilfully made light of sin, “have put darkness for light, and light for darkness,” will discover their error when it will be for ever too late to retrieve, retrace, or repair it. Their light will have been darkness here; and their end the blackness of darkness hereafter;—“*outer* darkness;”—exclusion from the fount of light;—and *that* exclusion, and *that* darkness, for ever.







